

Part I: Germany's Defeat in World War I

The accomplishments of the German people were remarkable in the nineteenth century, but Germany did not exist as a country until 1871. Unlike Britain, France, and Russia—countries that were unified politically at the end of the Middle Ages—the German lands entered the modern age divided up among dozens of local rulers. In the 1860s, Otto von Bismarck, the prime minister of the most powerful German state, Prussia, embarked on a campaign to create a united Germany. To achieve his goals, Bismarck led Prussia to victory in wars against Denmark, the Austrian Empire, and France.

After German unification, Bismarck worked to strengthen the power of the state and to increase Germany's influence abroad. Leaders of Bismarck's Germany highly valued stability and order, especially as revolutionary political movements gained a foothold in many European countries. Bismarck took a two-pronged approach to countering the revolutionaries. On the one hand, the government gave the army and the police broad powers to control civil unrest, while it restricted the rights of labor unions. On the other hand, Bismarck adopted reforms to improve conditions for workers that put many ordinary Germans ahead of their counterparts in Britain and France.

What was the relationship between social class and politics?

As in much of Europe, Germany had a rigid class structure. No matter how successful, few Germans could rise above the social class into which they were born. The German higher education system, which was very selective, expensive, and rigorous, reinforced these divisions. Moreover, the officer corps of the German military and top positions in government were reserved for members of the upper class.

Germany's rapid industrialization created strains in German society. As the number of industrial workers grew, so did the strength of

the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the leading working-class party. Germany's parliament, the Reichstag, was increasingly torn by tension between the upper class, which had traditionally held political and economic power, and the working class.

By the time Bismarck left office in 1890, he had molded a state that was efficient but rigid. While all adult men had the right to vote in national elections, real political power remained in the hands of the kaiser (a word meaning king that comes from the Roman title of "caesar") and his ministers. Voting restrictions at the regional level ensured that the German nobility and wealthy industrialists held the largest share of influence. These groups opposed major changes in the political system and remained loyal to the kaiser.

Germany was in many respects undemocratic, but the government did not attempt to completely stamp out dissent. It permitted a considerable degree of intellectual and artistic freedom. Germany at the turn of the century was the scene of intense political, social, and cultural debate. Many of Europe's most radical movements in politics and art had their origins in Germany.

The Road to Sarajevo

As the twentieth century began, Germany had one implacable enemy—France. German unification took place only after the Prussian army inflicted a humiliating defeat on the French in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. As a result, France was forced to turn over the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany and to pay Germany five billion francs.

How did suspicions develop between Germany and the other leading countries of Europe?

Germany's growing strength and ambition raised concerns among the leaders of Britain and Russia as well as France. In 1907, these three nations joined to form the Triple

Entente to counter German power. Germany had provoked Britain by embarking on a large-scale program to build up its navy. While German leaders argued that a large fleet was necessary to protect their country's worldwide commercial interests and overseas colonies, the British saw the German build-up as a threat to their long-standing dominance at sea.

“A German maritime supremacy must be acknowledged to be incompatible with the existence of the British Empire, and even if that Empire disappeared, the union of the greatest military [Germany] with the greatest naval power in one state would compel the world to combine for the riddance of such an incubus [evil spirit].”

—Senior official of the
British Foreign Office

The British also worried that Germany would challenge their country's position as the world's leading exporter. They resented German efforts to establish diplomatic and commercial footholds in Africa, the Middle East, and other areas of British influence. Meanwhile, Russian officials feared that the growth of German military power was part of a plan to grab territory from the Russian Empire. They also felt that the high tariffs Germany imposed on Russian grain imports were unfair.

Faced with three hostile powers, German leaders increasingly believed that they were surrounded. In response, they strengthened their alliance with the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the south-east. Ironically, this alliance brought Germany into the two-front war that many German leaders had long sought to avoid.

How did Europe plunge into war in 1914?

On June 28, 1914 a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Austria-Hungary's heir to the throne, and his wife Sophie. The Serbs living in Austria-Hungary wanted to join their Serbian brethren in Serbia proper, but Austria-Hungary was unwilling to give up the land. It seemed to the murderers that only a radical action would convince the leaders of their desires. The assassination set off a devastating chain of events in Europe. Austria-Hungary's political alliance with Germany and Serbia's ethnic ties to Russia meant that many would be drawn into what could have been a local, limited crisis.

Germany supported Austria-Hungary's excessive demands for justice from Serbia. Russia, in support of its ally Serbia, refused to give in to the threat of German intervention and mobilized its forces to demonstrate its steadfastness. Fulfilling its military alliance with Russia, France entered into the storm once Germany declared war on Russia. Germany, recognizing that having to fight a two-front war against both France and Russia could be

disastrous, attacked France through neutral Belgium as a means to achieve quick victory. This action invoked a treaty that Britain had with Belgium guaranteeing Belgium's neutrality. Great Britain entered the war against Germany on August

4th. World War I had begun.

Many Germans were initially enthusiastic about the war. Thousands rushed to enlist. Even the leadership of the SPD in the Reichstag supported the war effort by voting to provide the military with additional funds. German workers, long suspected of disloyalty by top government officials, patriotically rallied around the kaiser.

What were the advantages and disadvantages for each side in the war?

In the first month of the war, Germany

**The lamps are going out all
over Europe, we shall never
see them lit again
in our lifetime.”**

—British Foreign Minister
Sir Edward Grey, August 1914

launched a massive offensive against France that almost captured Paris. In September, however, French and British forces halted the advance of the German army. German troops established defensive trenches stretching from the North Sea to neutral Switzerland to try to protect their gains in the West. The system of trenches became known as the Western Front.

This Western Front moved little for the next four, bloody years. From either side of the trench line, British, French, and German soldiers endured endless frontal attacks. The new modern weapons of war brought never-before-seen casualties. Machine guns, poisonous gas, and powerful artillery led to the death of over one million men by the end of 1914.

On the Eastern Front, German forces were more successful. In late August 1914, the Germans repulsed a Russian offensive that had crossed their frontiers. In the following months, they took the offensive and advanced deep into the territory of the Russian Empire. By March 1917, military setbacks and increasing misery at home forced Russia's ruler, Tsar Nicholas II, to step down. Eight months later, a communist government under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin seized power and began making plans to pull Russia out of the war.

On the oceans, Britain used its naval superiority to impose a naval blockade around Germany. Germany was cut off from its colonies, as well as from supplies of overseas food and raw materials. Poor harvests in 1916 and 1917 and an unusually cold winter in 1916-17 worsened the effects of the blockade. Millions of Germans, especially those in the cities who could not afford the black-market prices for food and fuel, were pushed to the brink of star-



German POWs marching in France in 1917, escorted by British soldiers.

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vation. More than 700,000 German civilians died during the war as a result of the blockade. Meanwhile, German submarines, or U-boats, tried to enforce a blockade against Britain and France.

How was World War I different from earlier wars?

Unlike European conflicts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, World War I evolved into a “total war” in which the struggle was not limited to the battlefield. Each side tried to cripple the other’s economy and undermine morale on the home front. Even neutral countries, such as the United States, found that their ability to trade freely with Europe was in danger. From the early months of the war, the British naval blockade had all but wiped out U.S. foreign trade with Germany and its allies. But German submarine attacks on U.S. ships left an even deeper impression on U.S. public opinion.

How did the United States come to be involved in the war?

When World War I broke out, President Woodrow Wilson and the great majority of

people in the United States saw no reason for their country to become involved. For them, the war embodied the worst features of European politics. But by 1917 prospects of a German victory were a growing source of concern for U.S. officials. In a final attempt to end the fighting, President Wilson called upon the warring nations in January 1917 to accept a “peace without victory.”

Within a week of Wilson’s appeal for peace, the German government announced the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. This meant that any merchant ship in the war zone, even one from a neutral country, could be sunk without warning. German leaders felt their decision was justified by the fact that ships flying the U.S. flag were often used to transport military supplies to the Allies. After three U.S. merchant ships were sunk in March 1917, the United States declared war against Germany on April 2, 1917. Although large numbers of U.S. troops would not reach the Western Front until 1918, the entry of the United States into the war raised hopes among Britain, France, and the other Allies.

How did public opinion in Germany shift in 1917?

In Germany, significant opposition to the war appeared in 1917. In April, walkouts by thousands of German workers—more than 200,000 in Berlin alone—illustrated the growing discontent. That same month, radical members of the SPD split off to form two new political parties. One of the groups was known as the Spartacus League, in honor of the Thracian slave who led a revolt against Rome in the first century B.C.E. In the Reichstag, the SPD had become the largest party, although its members had not been given any role in the government. In July 1917, the SPD and other leftist parties joined forces to pass a resolution in the Reichstag that called for peace.

Protests against the war hardened the resolve of top German officials to press on to a military victory. Control of the German government passed into the hands of

Germany’s two leading generals, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich von Ludendorff. They approved stronger measures to combat the antiwar movement. For example, the leader of the SPD in the Reichstag, Friedrich Ebert, was charged with treason for supporting a strike of munitions workers. In addition, the newly formed Fatherland Party launched a campaign to promote German patriotism and support for the war.

What events in 1918 caused the war to take a turn?

The war was approaching a decisive juncture in the early months of 1918. In the United States, President Wilson unveiled a fourteen-point peace plan in January 1918 that raised hopes for an end to the conflict. Wilson sought to turn despair over the war into support for his vision to reshape international relations. Central to Wilson’s plan were the principles of self-determination, open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, free trade, and arms control.

Advocates of peace in Germany took heart from the fact that Wilson’s Fourteen Points did not blame their country for the war. Likewise, the plan did not impose specific penalties on Germany.

Meanwhile, Germany’s generals saw an opportunity to achieve final military victory as a result of developments in Russia. Lenin and his fellow communists had come to power promising land, peace, and bread. They were eager to end the war against Germany so they could focus their energies on their opponents inside Russia. On March 3, 1918, Lenin’s government signed a separate peace treaty with Germany at the town of Brest-Litovsk. Under the agreement, Russia gave up huge areas of land along its western border, as well as 40 percent of its industry.

The Brest-Litovsk Treaty enabled Germany to shift hundreds of thousands of troops to the Western Front for a major offensive. German leaders wanted to strike quickly, fearing that the arrival of fresh troops from the United States would eventually turn the tide of the war. On March 21, 1918, German soldiers

swarmed out of their trenches to launch a final assault against the Allies. Once again, the German people were assured that victory was near. But this was not to be, as a series of unexpected events would overtake them in the summer and fall of 1918.

armistice, then, was surprising and confusing to many. Subsequent developments both in Germany and in their country's relations with the rest of Europe further dismayed the German public.

How did the war end for Germany?

By July 1918, over a million U.S. soldiers had arrived to thwart the German advance. The German army suffered more than 600,000 casualties. German military leaders realized that their attempt to break through the Western Front and capture Paris would not succeed. Allied counterattacks made sizeable gains, and by mid-October the Germans withdrew from France and back across Belgium. They asked Wilson to bring about an armistice based on the Fourteen Points.

A war-exhausted Germany was also in the midst of a full-scale revolution. Hunger, economic shortages, and frustration with the policies of the kaiser led to riots in the streets and mutinies within the military. Facing social and political upheaval as well as imminent military defeat, German officials agreed to surrender, believing that Wilson's Fourteen Points would be the blueprint for the peace negotiations to be held in Paris. Until October 1918, ordinary German people, though weary of the war, had believed it could be won as their leaders had told them. The news of the

**President Wilson's Fourteen Points
January 8, 1918**

1. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at.... Diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view...
2. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside of territorial waters, alike in peace and in war...
3. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among the nations...
4. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest points consistent with domestic safety...
5. A free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims...
6. The evacuation of all Russian territory [a reference to those areas occupied by German troops]...
7. Belgium...must be evacuated and restored...
8. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine... should be righted...
9. A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality...
10. The people of Austria-Hungary...should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development...
11. [the establishment of new states and the settlement of national boundaries in the Balkans]...
12. The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life...and autonomous development; and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations...
13. An independent Polish state should be erected...which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea...
14. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small alike.